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June 20, 2018

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Hon. Edgardo Ramos
United States Courthouse
40 Foley Square
New York, NY 10007

Dear Judge Ramos,

We, Zoe Stahl and Nora Stephens, write in support of Tyrell Whitaker, who is a graduate of The Focus Forward Project. The Focus Forward Project is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing an educational curriculum focused on reentry for federal pretrial inmates and those under pretrial supervision. The 12-week course is designed to provide both an intellectual and emotional outlet for students as they navigate the stress and uncertainty of the pretrial phase of their federal cases. The class meets once a week for two hours, and participants complete weekly reading, journal, and other homework assignments. The first half of each class is spent discussing and connecting with themes in the memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, by Ishmael Beah, who was a boy soldier in the Sierra Leone civil war, while the second half of each class focuses on life skills, highlighting a different skill each week. By the end of the course, participants have gained a variety of transferable skills and tools, including, but not limited to: a completed resume, interview skills, conflict resolution skills, public speaking skills, and the setting of both short and long term goals. The mission of The Focus Forward Project is to provide participants with the confidence and practical tools to successfully move forward with their lives.

Tyrell was an exceptionally engaged and eager student, who took full advantage of the Focus Forward Project course. He always came to class with a positive attitude, his assignments completed, eager to share his journal entries, ready to take notes, and asking thoughtful follow-up questions. He often went above and beyond what was asked of him, too. Once, when the students were accidentally brought down to the library, despite class being cancelled, Tyrell convinced his classmates to take the time to practice giving the speeches they'd had been writing for class and offer one another feedback. This speaks not only to Tyrell's dedication to improving himself and his speech-giving skills, but also his desire to see his fellow classmates succeed. Another time, when going over tips about how to stay motivated, Tyrell, after listening carefully and taking notes, also offered

suggestions of his own. He shared with the class the “importance of knowing your worth” in order to stay motivated. Tyrell’s suggestion demonstrated his emotional intelligence and his desire to help others.

Tyrell’s engagement with the assigned book, *A Long Way Gone*, also impressed us. By the fourth session of twelve, Tyrell had read ahead, completing the book before anyone else in our twelve-person class. He explained that at first he had felt “skeptical” about the book, but, after finishing, understood “how and why we chose to teach this memoir.” We appreciated his openness to learning and thinking differently. Tyrell was very conscientious to not share any spoilers with the class; however, once the class had caught up to Tyrell, he was eager to share his further insights. Tyrell supported his comments with specific evidence or anecdotes from the book, creating more intellectually rigorous and emotionally intelligent conversations. This level of engagement is not surprising given his previous coursework. We understand that since being placed at the Metropolitan Correctional Center, Tyrell has earned his GED and has taken 36 courses since his incarceration, including but not limited to African and African American Drama, a Moth storytelling class, and various zoology courses.

Tyrell’s drive, focus, and determination was a key to his success. About two years ago, Tyrell was enrolled in a Focus Forward class. However, due to an administrative error, Tyrell was unable to be included in the course. Over the course of the year, Tyrell followed up with the MCC’s education department to ensure that he was part of the upcoming Focus Forward class. After two years of waiting, Tyrell successfully joined the course. Tyrell’s commitment demonstrates his ability to navigate various situations to pursue and achieve what he wants; Tyrell knows who to ask and how to ask to ensure that he enlists—as opposed to antagonizes—key decision makers. Throughout the course, Tyrell continued to demonstrate this ability. Sometimes, he would follow up to ask about the status of his and his fellow students’ resumes, asking when he and his classmates could expect edits as he was excited to perfect and complete his resume. Whenever he asked, Tyrell expressed how much he appreciated our help and understood when our edits were taking longer than expected. We are confident that Tyrell’s drive and ability to navigate systems will serve him well beyond the walls of MCC.

Tyrell’s unfailingly positive attitude helped him with his accomplishments, too. From the beginning, Tyrell was comfortable sharing his past. He spoke openly, and vulnerably, about the negative worldview he held before being incarcerated. Tyrell was not sure what he wanted out of life and was almost certain that, even he did know what he want, that he wouldn’t be able to achieve those goals. However, now Tyrell sees himself as a changed person

who is positive and knows when to walk away from trouble. It was immediately clear to us that this is absolutely true.

Tyrell's desire to genuinely do good was a large motivator, as well. During a game in which students asked one another thoughtful questions, Tyrell was asked, "If money was no object, what would you do and why?" to which he responded, "I would want to be a lawyer—not getting paid for my service wouldn't be a problem. Helping people fight for justice and equality would be all I need." Throughout the class, Tyrell often spoke of his desire to give, and, throughout the class, he did. He was quick to help students understand more complex themes in the memoir, helping his classmates make connections between their lives and the themes in the book. He would often listen to others and offer specific and personal advice, too. We are certain that not only will Tyrell achieve his potential, but he will work to ensure others become the best versions of themselves as well.

Tyrell is able to articulate a future—one with both short and long term goals—and we are confident, given Tyrell's intellect, determination, and motivation, Tyrell will succeed in realizing his future. For short term goals, Tyrell shared he wanted to "take advantage of every resource and program that BOP has to offer me while in jail and help as many people as possible receive their GED while in jail." Tyrell clearly has taken advantage of educational offerings. For long term goals, Tyrell wrote the following: start his own family: wife, kids, house, and dog; start his own business and teach his kids to run it so when they have their own families they can pass it along throughout the family; and give back to the community every single chance he gets. Given the way Tyrell approached Focus Forward and all his other educational opportunities at MCC, we have no doubt in his ability to achieve these long term goals.

Your Honor, our intent is to give you our view of Tyrell, who we have had the pleasure to know since the fall of 2017. We appreciate the time Your Honor has taken to read our letter. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us directly at the numbers listed below.

Sincerely,

/s/Zoe Stahl
Zoe Stahl
Focus Forward Project
Class Facilitator
(646) 530-2782

/s/Nora Stephens
Nora Stephens
Focus Forward Project
Class Facilitator
(301) 787-0332



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April 22, 2020

Joel Putnam
Interim Executive Director

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Hon. Edgardo Ramos
United States District Court
Southern District of New York
Thurgood Marshall United States Courthouse
40 Foley Square
New York, NY 10007

Dear Judge Ramos,

We, Zoe Stahl and Nora Stephens, write to expand upon our previous letter dated June 20, 2018, about Tyrell Whitaker, our student from the Focus Forward Project (FFP). Due to the Bureau of Prisons' regulations, we have not been able to see or speak with Tyrell since his graduation from FFP in May 2018. However, nearly two years later, we remember Tyrell not just well, but as someone we would want as our colleague, friend, and neighbor.

Among our class of very thoughtful and hardworking students, Tyrell stood out because of his extraordinary growth throughout his incarceration. Each class we began by sharing highs and lows of the week. One week, Tyrell told our class that he had just received the first diploma of his life: his GED. He was the last of his siblings to receive his diploma, and Tyrell surprised his mother by sending her his certificate. Since completing his GED, Tyrell has continued to pursue a rigorous course load. While working on his resume, Tyrell brought in his transcript: he had taken over 36 classes including, but not limited to, African and African American Drama, a Moth storytelling class, and several zoology courses.

We, as co-facilitators of FFP, also saw Tyrell's work ethic and curiosity firsthand. According to one of the correctional officers, Tyrell worked

tirelessly to enroll in FFP. For years, he had tried to register for the class because he sought the academic challenge, and, once admitted, Tyrell took the utmost advantage. He made the class better through his contributions—by asking thoughtful follow-up questions, helping other students when they were confused, and inspiring others with his positive attitude.

Even more, Tyrell's coursework was college-caliber. For example, when asked to fill out a resume sheet, many students did not include all the necessary details or think critically about what could go on a resume. Tyrell was the only student who filled out his resume sheet perfectly and required no further edits from us. It was clear that Tyrell had put in substantial time and had thought about his past experiences, both in and out of the MCC, as well as the skills he gained from each experience. We think this anecdote speaks to Tyrell's character. Tyrell is looking for every opportunity to improve himself and is willing to put in the time, effort, and brain-power to accomplish his goals. Through his self-improvement and learning, Tyrell has demonstrated that he would be an excellent fellow student or colleague.

Tyrell is not just committed to his intellectual growth, but his emotional growth. Throughout his incarceration, he has been just as concerned about others' self-actualization as his own. For example, during our resume-writing class, Tyrell shared the following work experiences: Since completing his GED, Tyrell has tutored others in MCC to ensure they receive their high school diploma. He was also selected by correctional officers at the MCC to serve as suicide watch for his fellow inmates—which requires completing rounds every 15 minutes and writing detailed reports. Tyrell was selected, and kept, these roles because he is mature, dependable, and bright—all attributes which made him a leader in and friend to all in our class.

We also saw this emotional growth firsthand. During our speech-giving sessions, Tyrell opened up about the regret he feels for his past crimes. Tyrell chose to talk about this topic—it was not a requirement or even a suggestion. He expressed regret to a group that grew into a supportive community. There is no doubt that Tyrell's vulnerability inspired others to speak about their past regrets and why they feel equipped to change their lives now.

Given Tyrell's exceptional performance as a FFP student, we think he would thrive once returning to the outside world. When sharing job interviewing tips it became clear that Tyrell has already succeeded at the following: working for the United States Post Office, a role requiring much trust in its government workers, and as an employee at Walmart, a store that is currently essential to provide Americans with the groceries and supplies they need, as well as in food service. With Tyrell's past experience, we are confident he will actively contribute after re-entry.

Your honor, we think so highly of Tyrell, that should he be released we would be more than willing to help with any or all of the following:

- Help Tyrell figure out various housing, job, and school options. In fact, Nora has an open apartment in Brooklyn and trusts Tyrell to live there should he need to quarantine before returning to his family.
- Connect Tyrell with organizations equipped to help Tyrell with navigating school, work, and housing opportunities.
- Serve as a reference for Tyrell.

Your Honor, our intent is to provide you with our experience with Tyrell Whitaker. We appreciate the time Your Honor has taken to read our letter. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at the numbers below.

Sincerely,

Zoe Stahl
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